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Khanhlinh Le

University of San Francisco, kqle2@dons.usfca.edu

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HOLLYWOOD MEDIA AND THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH: THE REPRESENTATION
OF ASIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITY AND ITS EFFECTS

Khanhlinh Quang Le

APS 650: Capstone Project

Professor Brian Komei Dempster

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Abstract

Asian Americans are becoming one of the largest growing minority groups in the United States, almost surpassing the Latinx community. Asian Americans, however, are rarely ever represented in Hollywood films and are limited to stereotypical roles. Asian American actors have a difficult time finding roles playing characters that are three-dimensional and complex. While both Asian American men and women face this challenge, it seems that in Hollywood films and television shows, Asian American males are even less represented than females and are typically portrayed as the quiet nerd, sexy doctor, martial arts expert, or the villain. These media stereotypes impact how we view Asian American men, and some buy into these problematic portrayals. Through the use of primary sources, such as films and personal interviews, and analysis of previous academic studies, this project seeks to uncover and dispel myths about Asian American masculinity. This research offers important historical context, explaining how the concept of the Yellow Peril plays a key role in Hollywood's problematic representations of Asian Americans in film. The paper also dissects the model minority stereotype and shows how the pressure Asian American men face to conform to this stereotype—along with dynamics of white hegemonic masculinity—create negative consequences and psychological effects. Ultimately, my analysis reveals the complex dynamics of Asian American masculinity, uncovers the harm of stereotypes, and hopes to inspire more progressive media portrayals of Asian Americans in the future.

Keywords: Asian Americans, Asian, masculinity, model minority, yellow peril, stereotypes.

Introduction

In 2016, a social movement called “#StarringJohnCho” was created¹ in response to Hollywood’s whitewashing² of Asian characters and advocacy for more Asian Americans in lead roles.³ The subject of this movement is John Cho who is an Asian American actor well-known for his role in the *Harold and Kumar* movies.⁴ During this time, Scarlett Johansen was cast as Motoko Kusanagi in the live-action *Ghost in the Shell* and Emma Stone as Alison Ng in *Aloha*. They are both white actresses portraying Asian characters, which is extremely problematic, yet Hollywood released the films anyway. Because Hollywood disproportionately features and celebrates white actors, actors of Asian backgrounds do not get enough representation. The media space is white-dominated.

Even though the world of Hollywood is predominantly white, not everyone in America is. According to an article from the Pew Research Center, “Asians are the fastest growing minority group in the United States, surpassing the Hispanic/Latinx community.”⁵ The Asian community may be a large racial and ethnic group within the United States, yet there is hardly any representation of them in Hollywood media. In particular, Asian American (AA) actors have a difficult time finding roles they want to fill that are not stereotypical. For instance, in Hollywood films and television shows, AA men⁶ are typically portrayed as quiet nerds, martial

¹ Created by William Yu on Twitter with the username @its_willyu.

² The term “whitewashing” in regards to Hollywood means casting a white actor in a non-white role.

³ Paul Chi, “Two Years After #StarringJohnCho, John Cho Is Finally a Leading Man,” *Vanity Fair* (Vanity Fair, July 26, 2018), <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/07/john-cho-starring-searching>.

⁴ Yu photoshopped posters of famous Hollywood films with Cho as the protagonist. Cho was not affiliated with this movement but acknowledged the importance of it.

⁵ Abby Budiman, Anthony Cilluffo, and Neil G Ruiz, “Key Facts about Asian Origin Groups in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, May 22, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/22/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>.

⁶ This research will focus primarily on Asian American men who are of Southeast Asian or East Asian descent as there is more research on these two subgroups. South Asians are a subgroup who should not be ignored and may be mentioned briefly, but the scope and time frame of this project doesn’t allow for an in-depth exploration of this particular group.

arts experts, or villains. On the other hand, AA women are mainly portrayed to be the submissive love interest or the dragon lady.⁷ While this project focuses primarily on movies, it is important to note that the lack of representation and stereotypical portrayals of Asian American are widespread and pervasive media trends. A study by Chin et al. underscores this point, noting that “AAPI actors are segregated on two ends of a spectrum of representation . . . most shows feature just one AAPI actor. However, on the other end of the spectrum, one-third of all AAPIs are concentrated on just 11 shows. Without these 11 shows, AAPI representation would drop by a hefty 34.5%.”⁸ The problematic representations of Asian Americans by the media has real-life implications. DuCros et al. argue that “[s]tereotypes can contribute to structural inequalities and even adversely affect how people of color see themselves: AAPI viewers can internalize negative stereotypes, ultimately limiting their sense of belonging and aspirations in American society.”⁹

Because of how Hollywood portrays Asians, people outside of the Asian community might more easily *believe* in these stereotypes since they are so prevalent; they become a source of information. The constant emphasis on the model minority stereotype through media simply causes non-Asians to view Asians in a certain way that is supposedly “positive” but also causes microaggressions (being unknowingly yet subtly racist). The Model Minority Myth “paints a portrait of Asian Americans that connotes generally positive intrinsic talents and characteristics.”¹⁰ In addition to being forced to conform to the model minority paradigm, AA

⁷ Dragon lady is a stereotype created back in the 1800s during the production of Transcontinental Railroad to portray East Asian women as somewhat evil and mysterious. The term is hardly used now, but the stereotype is still prevalent to this day. South and Southeast Asian women were also subjugated to this stereotype.

⁸ Christina B. Chin et al., “TOKENS ON THE SMALL SCREEN: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Prime Time and Streaming Television (In Alphabetical Order),” March 2017, <https://www.aapisontv.com/uploads/3/8/1/3/38136681/aapisontv.2017.pdf>.

⁹ Faustina M. DuCros et al., “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on TV,” *Contexts* 17, no. 4 (November 2018): 12–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218812863>, 16.

¹⁰ Kiang, Lisa, Witkov, Melissa, and Thompson, Taylor. “Model Minority Stereotyping, Perceived Discrimination, and Adjustment Among Adolescents from Asian American Backgrounds.” *Journal of Youth & Adolescence* 45, no. 7 (July 2016): 1366–79. doi:10.1007/s10964-015-0336-7.

men are often forced to conform to white hegemonic masculine values¹¹ as well. The dual stressors AA men face due to their gender role but also being a minority are sometimes overlooked.

The following research offers valuable historical context regarding Hollywood and analyzes how media portrayals of Asian American (AA) men shape the perceptions of those inside and outside of the Asian American community. Moreover, this research explores the effects of the Model Minority and other racial stereotypes, which determine not only the self-image and perceived masculinity of the AA male and his professional success but his desirability when it comes to sex and dating.

The Model Minority Myth, Yellow Peril, and Asian American Masculinity

In order to understand the contemporary situation of Asian Americans, some important historical context is needed. Asian Americans have long been seen as a threat and perceived in a xenophobic manner. This perception is linked to the concept of “yellow peril,” which was first introduced during the 18th century as the infamous Mongolian pillager Genghis Khan began to pillage the continents of Asia and Europe. While he and his gang of warriors destroyed Europe, raping the women and destroying towns, the western countries became afraid that the continent of Asia would soon take over the western countries. During this time, China was swiftly rising economically, and their military power was becoming stronger. Japan’s economy and military were also booming, following the footsteps of their older brother “China.” In 1885, Japan had defeated the Soviet Union (now known as Russia) during the Russo-Japanese War which also

¹¹ Hegemonic masculinity is the idea that men must be the dominant one in society, being more superior to “weaker” men and women. “White” hegemonic masculinity is the idea that a man must be the “alpha-male” (a concept predominantly found in Western societies) which can be correlated to the notion of toxic masculinity, or the idea that certain emotions must be repressed in order to appear dominant.

caused European countries to have more fear.¹² Because Europe was afraid of how quickly Asia was adapting (becoming more “modern” as they became richer and more equipped with military force), the thought and terror of Asia taking over the entire globe spread like wildfire to the entire continent of Europe—thus the concept of “yellow peril” was created. Yellow referred to the color of Asian peoples’ skin and peril because the word literally means “danger.”¹³

As Asians began to enter the United States during the 19th and 20th century, Americans began to fear for their country as well—but not for the exact same reasons as Europe. America had created this concept of the “American Dream,” a sort of fantasy to entice those who lived outside the U.S. The “American Dream” is “the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone. The American Dream is achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance.”¹⁴ Sadly, the “American Dream” is heavily romanticized and many immigrants learned that the hard way through the constant segregation of them.

In order to achieve the “American Dream,” one had to learn English and get rid of one’s connection to culture, becoming 100% American. Because of the concept of the “American Dream,” white Americans were afraid that Asian immigrants would create widespread destruction if they were unable to assimilate.¹⁵ In order to prevent more Chinese immigrants from coming to America, and specifically the state of California during the Gold Rush, President Chester A. Arthur implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which halted Chinese

¹² Yuko Kawai, “Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 2 (April 2005): 109–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170590948974>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Adam Barone, “American Dream,” *Investopedia* (Dotdash, March 27, 2020), <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

immigration for 10 years.¹⁶ Those already in America were not allowed to become U.S. citizens.¹⁷

This xenophobia has persisted through many centuries, since the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, with Asian Americans experiencing racism and hate crimes. This information might be new to some who may be unaware that Asian Americans have been here for a long time. In history classes, the horrors Chinese immigrants went through during the 1860s are not talked about. Yet Chinese immigrants were the backbone of constructing the Railroad. We know how the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service surprise-attacked American troops at Pearl Harbor, causing World War II, yet not everyone knows about the camps where the American government unjustly imprisoned Japanese Americans, in fear they may attack out of the blue.

Indeed, the view towards Asian Americans only grew worse in 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Because of this incident, the government decided to put Japanese Americans in concentration camps to protect the white Americans from “yellow peril.”¹⁸ This stereotype has a long, horrible history and is much older than the “model minority” stereotype. While the yellow peril positioned Asians as a perceived threat to dominant culture, the model minority stereotype emerged from classic divide and conquer tactics, pitting people of color against one another. During the Black Power movement, which was influential during the 1960s and ‘70s, African Americans fought for their own rights. In the decades to follow, media representation of certain events focused less on a message of community empowerment and more on stirring up conflicts between people of color. We see this phenomenon in the following

¹⁶ History, ed., “Chinese Exclusion Act,” *History* (A&E Television Networks, LLC., November 19, 2018), <https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/chinese-exclusion-act-1882>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

example: “The media framed the [1992 Los Angeles riots] as an inter-racial conflict between Asians and Blacks because such a portrayal ‘resonates with underlying American ideological currents, which pit Asian Americans, as a model minority, against African Americans, as an urban underclass’.”¹⁹ The model minority concept made African Americans look seemingly inferior to Asian Americans, creating tense relationships between the two races which is still prevalent today. The “model minority” stereotype is further emphasized when an Asian American is expected to do better than other minorities. However, when an Asian American threatens a white person’s success, the notion of “yellow peril” may be perceived.

Professor Claire Jean Kim of University of California, Irvine is one of many scholars who assert the model minority myth was created to divide people of color: “During World War II, the media created the idea that the Japanese were rising up out of the ashes [after being held in incarceration camps] and proving that they had the right cultural stuff. And it was immediately a reflection on black people: Now why weren't black people making it, but Asians were?”²⁰ Kim argues that these arguments falsely conflate anti-Asian racism with anti-black racism.²¹

Nowadays, for those outside of the Asian community, the term “Model Minority” is perhaps unfamiliar, yet the characteristics of the stereotype are familiar and widespread, whether consciously or not. Existing literature defines the concept of Model Minority as “often associated with academics, for example, with Asian Americans viewed as particularly skilled in science, math, and music, as studious individuals who throw off the grading curve, or as quiet students that teachers and other school staff admire and respect.”²²

¹⁹ Ibid, 124.

²⁰ Kat Chow, “‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used As A Racial Wedge Between Asians And Blacks,” *NPR* (National Public Radio, April 19, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/19/524571669/model-minority-myth-again-used-as-a-racial-wedge-between-asians-and-blacks>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

According to the Pew Research Center, Asian Americans tend to have a higher income and higher education level when compared to other minority groups. In fact, at least half of the Asian population in the United States over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree, which is a higher percentage than other minority groups.²³ But to say that the Asian community is a “model minority,” as in the *ideal* minority, simply demeans other groups of people of color and segregates Asian Americans from them. The term “model minority” continues to promote the myth that Asian Americans are better than other minorities, which reinforces the historic divide within people of color, especially between Asian Americans and Black Americans.

Together, both the yellow peril concept and model minority myth are deep-rooted in Hollywood. In early Hollywood films such as *The Cheat* (1915)²⁴, Asian characters were represented as sinister and evil. Whenever such a character threatened a white person's safety or success, they were categorized as a threat under the guise of the “yellow peril.” In more recent years, some Asian American character roles are confined to the “model minority” stereotype, which emphasizes affluence and academic success rather than the complexity of characters or his or her problems. An example of this is *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017).²⁵ In this newest Spiderman movie from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Peter Parker's best friend Ned is a nerdy Asian boy who is a science aficionado that loves gaming and hacking. Ned is portrayed by Filipino-American actor Jacob Batalon. Films such as *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002)²⁶ attempt to counter this myth by showing how Asian Americans face pressures, challenges, and engage in

²³ Abby Budiman, Anthony Cilluffo, and Neil G Ruiz, “Key Facts about Asian Origin Groups in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center* (Pew Research Center, May 22, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/22/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>.

²⁴ Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa portrayed a character that raped and marked a white woman with a heated branding iron to claim her as his possession.

²⁵ *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, directed by Jon Watts (2017; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Entertainment Motion Picture Group, 2017), Film.

²⁶ *Better Luck Tomorrow*, directed by Justin Lin. (2002; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures Corporation, 2002), Film.

socially deviant behavior, even criminal activity. This film, directed by Justin Lin, who is now famous for the *Fast and Furious* franchise, uses a diverse, talented cast, including John Cho, to portray an intense, complex portrait of Asian Americans that explodes the concept of “model minority.”

One way the scholarly discourse challenges the positive implication of the Model Minority myth is by looking at its negative consequences. It is proven that AA men have experienced stressful experiences regarding their masculinity as seen in the 2013 study done by scholars Alexander Lu and Joel Y. Wong.²⁷ In their study, they created the “model masculinity stress theory” which integrates hegemonic masculinity, stereotypes, and mental health in order to examine how every AA man's experience with masculinity varies and is “uniquely stressful.”²⁸ The Asian men who were participating in this study were mainly college students either born in the United States or were immigrants. In their methodology, Lu and Wong had given their participants “stereotypical reflected appraisals that contradict potentially positive self-concepts,” and, in their research, made these key findings: “Second, participants strongly emphasize achievement beyond typical hegemonic masculine norms. Third, the combination of these experiences indicate that the subgroups of men whose role-identities conflict with hegemonic masculinity are predisposed toward stress because they are likely to confront stereotypical reflected appraisals.”²⁹

Results found that AA men were more stressed compared to Asian men who were immigrants as there was more pressure on the American-born Asian to be an active member of American society compared to the immigrant. This perhaps may be because the Model Minority

²⁷ Alexander Lu and Y. Joel Wong, “Stressful Experiences of Masculinity Among U.S.-Born and Immigrant Asian American Men,” *Gender & Society* 27, no. 3 (2013): 345–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213479446>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

myth places even more pressure on Asian Americans, hence immigrants have less stressors as they are perceived as “foreign” and not American. Drawing from this research, this project will reveal how stereotypes affect the psyche of Asian American males as well as how they interact with others and are perceived.

Scholars have also examined media representation of AA males, and, in turn, I will analyze what roles AA men have had in the past decade in Hollywood, using the 2019 study “Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2018” by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, et al.³⁰ Through this research, I can compare and contrast the roles AA men have had in Hollywood and understand whether or not their representation has improved in the past decade. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) represents a recent portrayal of Asian Americans, but we must remember that the film was the first in two decades to have an all-Asian cast.³¹

While there is unfair treatment towards AA men in Hollywood, they also experience unfair treatment in organizations/professional settings. This struggle is known as The Bamboo Ceiling.³² This study³³ about Southeast Asian American masculinity in organizations is important to analyze as it found that white women who exhibited the same behaviors as white men, such as being assertive or talkative, were the ones chosen to be leaders. Even on college campuses that had a predominantly large Asian student population, Asian American males were least likely to

³⁰ Stacy Smith et al., “Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2018,” 2019, <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality-report-2019-09-03.pdf>.

³¹ *Crazy Rich Asians*, directed by John M. Chu (2018; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018), Film.

³² Author and business strategist Jane Hyun created this term in her 2005 book *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians*. The term “bamboo ceiling” refers to the barriers Asian Americans may face in their professional career such as stereotypes and racism.

³³ Peter T. Keo and Pedro A. Noguera, “From the Margins to the Center: Debunking Claims about Southeast Asian American Masculinity,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 51, no. 2 (2018): 199–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2018.1518172>.

be chosen for leadership roles.³⁴ It was later proven the Asian American male students who were passed on for the leadership roles were actually more qualified than the white students.³⁵

In sum, all Asian Americans must contend with a history of xenophobia and racism along with the Yellow Peril and Model Minority paradigms. This research focuses on how Asian American men must manage the aspects of their racial identity, nationality, and masculinity. Masculinity is a universal concept, but each country has different definitions and characteristics of it. This research examines the connections between perceptions of Asian American masculinity and Hollywood media portrayals of AA men.

Understanding the Asian American Male Psyche: Methodology and Data/Analysis

In order to fully understand the Asian American male psyche, this project employs a mixed methods approach that includes interviews and data analysis. In particular, twelve volunteers of Asian descent participated in an interview or filled out a Google Form questionnaire of 15 questions regarding their cultural identity both as Asian and American (see Appendix). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the original methodology shifted into an online format, which limited the findings. Since 10 out of the 12 interviews were conducted online, participants may have not taken the interview as seriously as they would have in-person. As a result, some data found in the interviews was not as comprehensive or thorough as real-life responses would have allowed.

In addition, the background of the participants played a role. The age range of the group was 22 to 28 and all males were heterosexual. All participants were college-educated with at least a bachelor's degree, except one was a college drop-out. Six were half/mixed-race with a

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Caucasian background, five were full Asian being 100% the same ethnicity, and one was full Asian but of mixed Asian ethnicities. Almost all participants were from the West Coast except for a few from the East Coast. Due to diverse identities of the participants who volunteered to be interviewed/fill out the survey, the data collected was not what was expected. While still helpful, there was a disproportionate amount of data received from half/mixed-race participants and less feedback than expected from full Asian participants, which affected the analysis. While this research does mention mixed identity, the main purpose of the research was to focus on those who are full Asian American. Furthermore, eight out of the 12 interviewees were born in heavily Asian-populated cities, which could have affected their answers. The sample size for this qualitative research was bigger than expected, but the results were not as balanced as hoped.

Participants who were full-Asian expressed distress when it came to their college education and the high expectations from their parents, but the participants who were half/mixed-race did not have the same stressor. We can infer through analysis of the qualitative data, every participant had stressors that were uniquely different from each other. Those who grew up in areas with a smaller Asian population felt the need to be more noticed by their peers whereas those from heavily populated Asian areas did not feel the same as they were surrounded by those who looked like them, so seemed to care less about the representation they see in the media.

However, all participants agreed that Asian representation in film should be presented but in a way that is natural and not forced. For example, one interviewee, age 23, stated that “[i]t would be nice if Hollywood just gave Asian guys regular roles and not make a huge role out of their race or something. Not all of us are good at math, make him a janitor.”³⁶

³⁶ 23-year-old first-generation Chinese American male from Sacramento, California, Google Forms submission to author, April 18.

In order to give these men a voice, and to offer support for various claims, this research paper uses quotes from the interviews conducted, which serve as valuable primary sources.

Perceptions of Asian American Masculinity and Identity

As research studies have shown and as some of the interviewees demonstrated in their answers, Asian American men are often forced to conform to white hegemonic masculinity. The stressors Asian American men face being not only a male but also being a minority are overlooked. The concept of masculinity is deeply rooted in all cultures; whatever traits and behaviors you have determine how much of a man you are. Asian men have been the butt of many jokes (especially in the U.S.) when it comes to their personalities (i.e., they are too nerdy or act “too Asian”; “foreign” or “uncivilized”) and other physical attributes (i.e., being constantly told they have “chinky” eyes and have a small penis from outside groups).

In an interview with a 22-year-old fourth-generation Japanese American,³⁷ he recounted, “I was bullied in high school for being quiet and weird because I focused on school. Then in college I joined a frat and partied more and suddenly I was accepted.” The interviewee also mentioned he experienced prejudice from other Asian Americans because he wasn’t familiar with his Japanese culture and knew nothing about it—not even the language. The participant mentioned that his grandparents were in the Japanese concentration camps during WW2 which made them forcibly assimilate and forget their culture in order not to be targeted for hate crimes when being openly racist was acceptable. Other Asian Americans made fun of him for being “whitewashed.”³⁸

³⁷ Interview with 22-year-old fourth-generation Japanese American male from Sacramento, California, April 18, 2020.

³⁸ “Whitewashed” is a term created/used by Asian Americans that refers to another Asian American who has completely assimilated and immersed themselves in American culture. Characteristics of an Asian American being

Earlier in this research, the term whitewashing was mentioned in regard to roles belonging to people of color being given to Caucasians. However, the term is also used within minority groups when describing a person of color (POC) not associating themselves with their cultural background and become more westernized to appear “different” in order to gain the attention of white people. Certainly there are Asian American males who whitewash themselves in order to assimilate and seem more masculine when compared to the white American male. It is important to note that whitewashing can cause even more stressors relating to their cultural identity and familial identity, especially to the degree it erases ethnic identity. Hence, the ethnicity of some is gradually “washed away” to become “white.” Of course, these whitewashed Asians will never truly be “white” since they are, in fact, Asian. They may act white, but their racial and ethnic identity will always be Asian. That is something that cannot be washed away.

Choosing to forget their ethnic and cultural roots in order to gain positive attention from a different racial group, specifically Caucasians, will not help them in the long run. If an Asian American male is whitewashed, he may seem “more masculine” since his behaviors and traits may be the same as a white man, but at the end of the day, his true racial identity determines his place in society. Sure, he will be more accepted by some white people, but some of his fellow Asian brothers and sisters will shun him. Thus, the whitewashed Asian American becomes even more displaced since he shuns his heritage for a new identity, and he gets shunned right back. The new white “community” he tries to put himself in will never *truly* let him join, since he is physically *not white*. Nevertheless, the model minority will always be prevalent to Asians, whitewashed or not—it will never go away.

whitewashed include not knowing how to speak one’s mother tongue, not knowing anything about one’s culture and history, and also having only white friends.

Various interviewees revealed the cost of a loss of identity. A 24-year-old first-generation Vietnamese American stated, “I grew up in a predominantly white town with no real connection to Asian culture other than my parents and family. If I could change something, I’d want to grow up more with my culture and learn more about it.”³⁹

In this interview along with the previous one mentioned, both subjects were whitewashed yet they both wanted to know more about their culture. However, these two came from different backgrounds and generations. The 22-year-old’s family gave up their language and heritage due to the Japanese wartime prison camps whereas the 24-year-old grew up in a predominantly white area. In addition, the two subjects did not forcefully whitewash themselves as some who are ashamed of their culture do. Their desire to assimilate was more due to their environment and family history rather than self-loathing.

The dynamics of whitewashing that the two interviewees described are further complicated by the perceived gender expectations for Asian American men. In an important study conducted by Professor C. Cheng in 1996, citing from Keo and Noguera, demonstrates the unique issues Asian American men contend with. They are seen “as having a mixture of masculine and feminine traits” which caused them to not be chosen for these leadership roles.⁴⁰ Cheng also observed, “Asian cultural values, such as humility and communalism . . . challenged the appropriateness of traits in hegemonic masculinity such as confidence, individualism, and competition.”⁴¹

Unlike other minority groups, Asian American men are expected to have the same form of masculinity as the white American male despite having significant cultural differences.

³⁹ 24-year-old first-generation Vietnamese American male from Forest Grove, Oregon, 2020, Google Form submission to author, April 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Negative stereotypes of Asian American males also “contradicts hegemonic notions of masculinity and appear to adversely affect their sense of self and their mental health.”⁴²

One might argue if an Asian American male has so many stressors, why does he not get any help from family or from a therapist? According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, those in the Asian American and Pacific Islander community are stigmatized when getting mental health treatment as they are seen as “crazy” by their family members.⁴³ Furthermore, seeking mental health help may bring shame to one’s family as their relatives may feel like they failed to have raised them.

The internalization of one’s problems is connected to the reactions one receives from important family members. “Anytime I told my mom I was stressed she would laugh and say how could I be stressed if she pays for my school and gives me a home to live and food to eat,”⁴⁴ said one interviewee. “I consider myself a depressed person but I’d never tell my parents. Maybe I’ll get help by myself one day but I’m too busy.” Through this subject’s experiences, we can see how he struggles with mental illness that are correlated with stressors in his life, yet he has no one to go for support. When going to his family for support, they did not believe that he had mental illness even though he comes from a supposedly supportive family. As the subject mentions, his parents seem to support him financially and in his academic life, so they assume he does not have any other stressors as they are taking care of him. Even though said subject explained his family life briefly, we can presume his family may be giving him pressure in school, thus hurting his mental health.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ryann Tanap, “Why Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders Don’t Go to Therapy,” *NAMI* (National Alliance on Mental Health, July 25, 2019), <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/July-2019/Why-Asian-Americans-and-Pacific-Islanders-Don-t-go-to-Therapy>.

⁴⁴ 23-year-old first-generation Chinese American male from Sacramento, California, Google Forms submission to author, April 18.

The Dating Market for Asian American Men

In light of these mental health issues, the issue of romance and dating bears further examination. When it comes to dating, Asian American men between ages 25 to 32 are not included in romantic relationship markets and are in fact excluded.⁴⁵ According to data taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, 60 percent of Asian males in America have never dated. This statistic is 20 percent higher when compared to males that are White, Black, and Hispanic.⁴⁶ Females are much more inclined to date compared to males. This existing research notes that there is a significant divide between males and females in the Asian community when it comes to sexual romantic involvement. Asian males participate in sexual activity much later compared to White, Black, and Hispanic males: “By age 17, 33% of Asian American males, compared to 53% of White males, 82% of Black males, and 69% of Hispanic males had lost their virginity (among girls, 28% of Asian American females, compared to 58% of White, 74% of Black, and 59% of Hispanic females had done the same).”⁴⁷

This study suggests that having earlier sexual experiences correlates with the number of negative results which is why researchers claim that Asian Americans having sexual relations later in their life is much healthier and ideal.⁴⁸ What researchers may not factor in is the possibility that Asian American males may be interested in sex but are simply unsuccessful when it comes to dating and having sex. This phenomenon is an important topic for future research. Moreover, some Asian American men may be unfairly perceived as undesirable, which is why

⁴⁵ Grace Kao, Kelly Stamper Balistreri, and Kara Joyner, “Asian American Men in Romantic Dating Markets,” *Contexts* 17, no. 4 (2018): 48–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218812869>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

they may experience more failure when it comes to sex or dating. Due to the stigma of the model minority and other stereotypes, Asian American men, no matter what sexual orientation, experience negative responses in the realm of dating and relationships. U.S. Census Data shows Asian American men who are in same-sex relationships have disadvantages as well especially when they are in a relationship with someone outside their race and when there is a large age gap.⁴⁹

“It was hard to date in high school since all the Asian girls dated the white guys,” said one interview subject. “I mean, I tried to date other girls too [that were not Asian] but it was hard to relate to them. I think I played more video games than go on dates to be honest.”⁵⁰

As we can see from this personal story, Asian American males have a harder time in the dating world compared to Asian American girls. Perhaps this is because Asian American girls are more sexualized and seen as submissive to non-Asians, a portrayal that is reinforced by Hollywood.⁵¹ Asian American men are stereotyped as nerdy thus this may affect the view others have of them. Asian American men are the targets of other stereotypes too, not just them being nerdy. These stereotypes can cause stressors to their mental health, which can be detrimental to their well-being.

This view of Asian American men is supported by the experience of actors themselves. Japanese Canadian actor Peter Shinkoda, known for his role as Nobu in Marvel’s *Daredevil* on Netflix expressed concern over the undesirability of Asian men saying, “I don’t know which is to blame—is it Hollywood and Western media perpetuating social preferences or is it the other way

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 23-year-old first-generation Vietnamese American male from Denver, Colorado, 2020, Google Form submission to author, April 18.

⁵¹ Morgan Dewey, “Sexualized, Submissive Stereotypes of Asian Women Lead to Staggering Rates of Violence,” *NNEDV* (National Network to End Domestic Violence, March 21, 2016), https://nnedv.org/latest_update/stereotypes-asian-women/.

around? Either way, for Asian guys it's a constant struggle having to deal with constant negative stereotypes surrounding us."⁵²

Such perceptions become even more complicated when issues of gender intertwine with sexuality. Sinakhone Keodara, a Laotian American who is a multilingual actor, writer, director and producer in Hollywood, was interviewed in an article that appeared in the *Washington Post* about the success of *Crazy Rich Asians* and how the film will help the desirability of Asian men. When asked about his experience on dating applications such as Grindr (for gay men only), he said, "It's heartbreaking . . . it's been really humiliating and degrading . . .".⁵³ Keodara said that he was told by men on the app, "Asian guys are not attractive" and "Asian guys are not desirable."⁵⁴ Asian American men who identify as homosexual have *another* layer of stressors when it comes to their identity. Not only are they part of one minority group, they become part of two based on another aspect of their identity. That alone creates stressors within their culture and their personal lives.

Stereotypes and Mental Health Stressors

While this research is primarily examining Asian American male identity for those whose cultural heritage is fully Asian, mixed race Asians are a subgroup within this minority group who are rarely talked about. In fact, these mixed-race Asians are sometimes stigmatized because they are either "not Asian enough" or "not white enough."

⁵² Allyson Chiu, "'Asian, Ew Gross': How the 'Crazy Rich Asians' Movie Could Help Change Stereotypes about Asian Men," *The Washington Post*, (The Washington Post, August 3, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/08/03/asian-ew-gross-how-the-crazy-rich-asians-movie-could-help-change-stereotypes-about-asian-men/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

A 25-year-old male, who is half Korean from his mother's side and half Caucasian from his father's side stated, described his mixed-race experience in an interview:

As a mixed race kid, I grew up in a predominantly white town, and was known as “the Asian kid” until somebody of full Korean ancestry moved into my school. I did not know much about Korean culture, and did not care about it until recently [when I got older]. I considered myself more American than anything else, and took the multicultural origins and immigrant nation ideals of the United States seriously. I am proud in some ways about my Korean heritage, but I do not feel as if it is truly mine, because I was the son of two people who were as culturally American as it could get.⁵⁵

Because the 25-year-old Korean/Caucasian American male grew up in a white area and was the only person of Asian identity at his school, he was labeled “the Asian kid” since no one looked like him—which is ironic as he is half white. However, when someone who was full-Asian, specifically Korean American arrived at his school, the interviewee's label of being “the Asian kid” in school diminished and was transferred over to new Korean American student. This proves that even though he had a mixed identity, since he was not full white in a white environment, he was perceived as his other race. Yet when he was compared to a full Asian American, suddenly he was considered more white since he was now perceived as less Asian.

At times, mixed race Asian American males are perceived as closer to the Western ideal of beauty as “exotic.” In contrast, full Asian males are rarely seen on screen as a male lead or in intimate scenes with white women. Their perceived lack of traditional masculinity and the racial prejudice they experience can affect their mental health and self-worth. This internal tension and dissonance involves an inescapable dilemma: they are expected to conform to hegemonic masculine norms while also trying to ignore racial stereotypes. The documentary *The Slanted Screen* (2006), analyzes the stereotypes and racism Asian American actors endured from

⁵⁵ Interview with 25-year-old second-generation Korean/Caucasian American male from San Jose, California, April 18, 2020.

Hollywood's black-and-white era to modern-day 21st century, further elucidating the problematic representation of Asian American men and its implications.⁵⁶

Another interviewee, age 25, who is half Filipino and half Japanese also had complicated feelings about his identity:

I had the idea of Asian American in my head through my parents but I definitely felt more American. I would say I am proud of my culture but it's still a question as to what that really IS as a 4th gen Asian American. I don't feel connected to Japanese or Pilipino mainland culture really at all. And as a mixed person, for some reason or another I've always felt more drawn to my Japanese heritage.⁵⁷

It is important to note that those who are biracial or of mixed race tend to be forced by society to choose what *main* race they identify as.

While the distinction of being mixed race or fully Asian is important, Asian American men, in general, face the pressure conform to hegemonic masculine norms while also trying to ignore racial stereotypes, which can impact their mental health and sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be many academic sources that cover mental health within the Asian male community, which is why it is important to study the stressors this specific group endures that can have a negative psychological impact.

Lu and Wong found that when they asked participants questions, while withholding emotion when communicating the participants appeared to be more exposed to stress.⁵⁸ Both scholars argue that the model minority stereotype implies that being successful in an academic or occupational setting equals the "absence or rejection of personal and sexual relationships. The model minority stereotype implies academic and occupational success as an absence or rejection

⁵⁶ *The Slanted Screen*, directed by Jeff Adachi (2006; San Francisco, CA: Center for Asian American Media, 2006), Film.

⁵⁷ 25-year-old fourth-generation Filipino/Japanese American male from Palo Alto, California, 2020, Google Form submission to author, April 18.

⁵⁸ Alexander Lu and Y. Joel Wong, "Stressful Experiences of Masculinity Among U.S.-Born and Immigrant Asian American Men," *Gender & Society* 27, no. 3 (2013): 345–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213479446>.

of personal and sexual relationships.”⁵⁹ Here, we can infer that the model minority stereotype enforces the idea that Asian American males tend to focus more on their academics or excel in the workplace, which makes them seem lacking in emotion or interesting qualities. Hollywood media enforces this stereotype as well when portraying Asian males as the nerd disinterested in romance, which can perpetuate the stereotype of Asian American males being asexual since they only care about school or work.

These stereotypes are harmful for the Asian American male as they are already expected to have higher education, a good-paying job, and be the “perfect” man—yet they experience stressors to excel in professional settings, which may cause some of them to be seen as unemotionally available or prioritizing work over personal, romantic relationships. Asian American males already have to worry about the cultural stressors they must deal with within their family, but they also have to worry about stressors outside their culture—school, work, dating. Having too many things to balance can cause burnout or mental illness.

When asked if they were pressured by family to do well in school, one subject, the same 22-year-old Japanese-American who was interviewed earlier, stated:

I was pressured very heavily by my parents and grandparents from a young age to always prioritize school. Both my parents were lawyers so they understood the value of a good education. Additionally, my mother grew up in a very strict Japanese household—a culture that emphasizes education. Also, my older sister attended UCLA for her undergraduate degree, so felt that pressure as well. Given my choice, I still would have definitely gone to a 4 year university for the experiences and learning. If I would not have gone to college, my family would have likely been very upset.⁶⁰

Lu and Wong also suggest that because of the damage stereotypes towards Asian Americans may cause, future researchers should study the effects when Asian Americans are given more positive

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interview with 22-year-old fourth-generation Japanese American male from Sacramento, April 18, 2020.

and realistic depictions of themselves. Both scholars claim that when incorporating these positive depictions of the men rather than stereotypical depictions, perhaps they would have a healthier self-image.⁶¹

However, we must recognize that full Asian Americans and mixed-race Asian Americans have different upbringings thus different stressors. When asked about whether or not they have a hard time being masculine due to Asian stereotypes, there were conflicting answers from men of both groups.

The 25-year-old Korean/Caucasian male subject stated, “I am not as affected by the [Asian] stereotypes because I can pass as full white. I cannot remember any time others would give me that treatment.”⁶²

Another subject, age 22, who is half Chinese and half Caucasian said something similar, “Well since I am only half Asian (and for what it’s worth, I somehow look pretty Latino despite no Latino heritage) no one has ever really insulted me with those stereotypes.”⁶³

Meanwhile, those who were full Asian American had different thoughts. For example, a second-generation 24-year-old Vietnamese American had strong words:

The model minority myth divides minorities. It’s this idea that Asians are a tier above our black and brown counterpart, but we’ll still never be on the same level as white people. The model minority myth is stereotypes of who we are. We are smart and that’s why we get straight A’s. We are respectful and polite that’s why we don’t cause problems. We are savvy and we’ll pull ourselves up from our bootstraps. The model minority myth sets standards of what minorities should be like, and the title has been tied to Asians. It divides us by making us believe we’re better than other minorities, and we’re favored by white people. However, at the end of the day we’ll never surpass our bamboo ceiling.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Alexander Lu and Y. Joel Wong, “Stressful Experiences of Masculinity Among U.S.-Born and Immigrant Asian American Men,” *Gender & Society* 27, no. 3 (2013): 345–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213479446>.

⁶² Interview with 25-year-old second-generation Korean/Caucasian American male from San Jose, California, April 18, 2020.

⁶³ 22-year-old first-generation Chinese/Caucasian American male from Portland California, 2020, April 18.

⁶⁴ 24-year-old second-generation Vietnamese American male from Portland, Oregon. 2020. Google Form submission to author, April 18.

The Absent Desirability of Asian American Males and Hollywood Un-Representation

The ways in which Asian men have been seen as inferior and effeminate compared to men from other racial groups are reinforced and perpetuated by Hollywood and the media. Because Asian American males have been perceived as lacking hegemonic/dominant masculine qualities, they are then seen as undesirable to not only females outside of their community, but also by females within their own.⁶⁵ The stereotype of Asian American males being asexual stems from the other stereotype of them being “nerdy” as they are perceived to be more interested in academics/work than romance. Asian American men are also stereotyped as being too unemotional and boring.⁶⁶

African American comedian Steve Harvey, known for being the host of the television show *Family Feud*, made a joke in January 2017 about a book that should be titled *How to Date a White Woman: A Practical Guide for Asian Men*. Harvey had also said, “You like Asian men? . . . I don’t even like Chinese food, boy . . . I don’t eat what I can’t pronounce” which implied the undesirability of Asian men.⁶⁷ Chef Eddie Huang, who is well known for his autobiography *Fresh Off the Boat* which ABC adapted into a sitcom for six seasons, responded to Harvey’s distasteful “joke” in a *New York Times* article saying, “Yet the one joke that still hurts, the sore spot that even my closest friends will press, the one stereotype that I still mistakenly believe at the most inopportune bedroom moments—is that women don’t want Asian men”⁶⁸, thus

⁶⁵ Grace Kao, Kelly Stamper Balistreri, and Kara Joyner, “Asian American Men in Romantic Dating Markets,” *Contexts* 17, no. 4 (2018): 48–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218812869>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

perceptions of Asian American men not being as masculine as their white counterparts not only affects them in leadership roles, but also in their romantic lives.

Non-Asians may argue that what Harvey said was a joke and to just take it lightly. However, it is important to note that Asian Americans have been the butt of these distasteful jokes for many years, having been portrayed with buck teeth and slanted eyes in western propaganda to being portrayed in films by white people.⁶⁹

A first-generation Vietnamese American from Denver, Colorado, age 23, describes an experience he had in elementary school physical education class when interacting with his classmates: “Some people call this ‘locker room’ talk. Comments about being skinny, penis size, athleticism in the locker room or on the field [. . .]. I took this as very normal and just ‘boys being boys’ at the moment. Again, in hindsight this should have bothered me more and it should have been addressed—but as a kid just trying to be a part of the team, I took this as normal.”⁷⁰

Through this subject’s personal story, we can examine how hegemonic masculinity affected him later on in life as he reflected on his childhood experiences. Since he had considered this “locker room” talk normal, as he has stated he thought it was a “boys being boys” moment, this further proves how the concept of hegemonic masculinity, in particular white hegemonic masculinity, emasculates and belittles others in order for there to be a dominant male figure. In this case, he was being subjected subtle racism and toxic masculinity due to his ethnicity. Since the subject now reflects on the experience later in his twenties, this also proves how stereotypes about Asians are harmful and affect their future mental health.

⁶⁹ Kira Schacht, “What Hollywood Movies Do to Perpetuate Racial Stereotypes,” DW Made For Minds (Deutsche Welle, February 21, 2019), <https://www.dw.com/en/hollywood-movies-stereotypes-prejudice-data-analysis/a-47561660>.

⁷⁰ 23-year-old first-generation Vietnamese American male from Denver, Colorado, 2020, Google Form submission to author, April 18.

The 25-year-old Filipino/Japanese American male subject stated the stressors he had in his life that affected his identity and masculinity being correlated with “[. . .] feeling unattractive/undesirable and un-masculine as a result of dating or lack thereof. Yes, definitely influenced subconsciously through Hollywood. I think without any like ‘role models’ for healthy Asian American masculinity, it is hard to think that anything other than being a chiseled white dude is attractive.”⁷¹ This further proves that because there are few positive and attractive portrayals of Asian American men, this individual perceives himself as less desirable than a Caucasian male, which caused stressors towards shaping a healthy identity in terms of race and gender.

Fortunately in recent years, more positive roles of Asian men are being portrayed in Hollywood. For example, the novel to film adaptation *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) has created the notion that Asian men *are* sexy. Actor Henry Golding has gained much attention since his breakout role as Nick Young in the film. His character Nick Young is a sexy guy in his late 20’s or early 30’s who is from an affluent Singaporean family. Nick is in a relationship with NYU professor Rachel Chu (portrayed by actress Constance Wu known for her role as Jessica Huang in *Fresh Off the Boat*) who is unaware of his family’s wealthy background. He invites her to go to his cousin’s wedding in Singapore, and Jessica is exposed to the world of the richest people in Asia and events occur that make her question their relationship.

Of course, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is simply fiction. But the actors are all real people. In fact, *Crazy Rich Asians* is the first film in 20 years to have an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). For many years, there have been articles critiquing Hollywood’s whiteness and lack of POC representation, especially Asian representation.

⁷¹ 25-year-old fourth-generation Filipino/Japanese American male from Palo Alto, California, 2020, Google Form submission to author, April 18.

Being half Asian and half white, Golding had received criticism because he was not full-Asian yet received the role in *Crazy Rich Asians* was announced with him saying, “There were sort of outcries of whitewashing, but, you know, I don’t have hate for that. I think it’s definitely a conversation that should be seen because it kind of just shows the studios that we’re watching [that] we’re very aware of how we want our films to tell authentic stories.”⁷²

Even when Hollywood integrates such characters, there are still various issues. Should an Asian play an Asian character that is of different ethnicity? Will their portrayal of a different ethnicity be accurate and authentic? Should their character address their ethnicity or ignore the “race” issue altogether to avoid being too preachy?

Journalist Mark Tseng-Putterman believes *Crazy Rich Asians* is actually a step *backward* for Asian Americans, comparing *Crazy Rich Asians* to the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, saying that even though the Asian actors portraying the characters are attractive, it felt as if the film’s “culturally specific storytelling” was “swapping Asian faces onto white bodies.”⁷³

What he had seemed to mean by this statement was that, while there is mention of Asian American identity versus Asian identity in the film, there is actually very little authentic representation. The character Rachel Chu doesn’t have any stressors other than visiting her boyfriend’s family—she’s a professor at NYU who has a rich beau. Her mom raised her on her own but they live comfortably and are middle-class. Her Singaporean boyfriend comes from a family of billionaires. There is no real struggle or at least no complexity to the struggles

⁷² Alexa Valiente, “‘Crazy Rich Asians’ Star Henry Golding on Controversy Behind His Casting in the Film: ‘I’m Asian Through and Through,’” *ABC News* (ABC News, July 24, 2018), <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/crazy-rich-asians-star-henry-golding-controversy-casting/story?id=56778243>.

⁷³ Mark Tseng-Putterman, “One Way That ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ Is a Step Backward,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, August 23, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/asian-americas-great-gatsby-moment/568213/>.

portrayed. Of course, Nick Young's mom doesn't approve of Rachel because she is "American" and not "Chinese" (which is interesting since the book emphasizes him being Singaporean but the film changes his ethnicity to Chinese-Singaporean). Other than there being Asian and Asian American actors, is there *really* any representation of the multifaceted and complex issues Asians face in real life?

In addition, Tseng-Putterman makes an interesting point when he says, "*Crazy Rich Asians* at times embraces a message of white-Asian equivalence by distancing itself from the 'wrong' kind of Asians."⁷⁴ He takes note that despite Singapore being a Southeast Asian country, the film only consisted of East Asian actors. It is ironic since Singapore is heavily populated with South and Southeast Asians. The only moments of representation for South/Southeast Asian people were with them portrayed as servants or guards. The film is portraying the citizens of Singapore by using East Asians which can infer that East Asians are "more attractive" than South/Southeast Asians. Tseng-Putterman critiques the film's choice to make Nick Young's ancestors as Chinese socialites from old money who moved to Singapore in the 1800's when there were just jungles: "Colonial mentality betrays the film's inability to imagine Asian and Asian American grandeur beyond simply swapping Chinese for whites at the top of the racial hierarchy."⁷⁵

It is ironic for Asians to want representation and yet this film portrays "darker-skinned" Asians as lesser than them so subtly it's almost overlooked. Just as white people can be prejudiced towards Asians, Asians can be prejudiced towards other Asians as well. Tseng-Putterman critiques the film through this comparison:

. . . an identity crisis in which Asian Americans figure in a liminal position: both perpetual foreigners and 'honorary whites.' If the pursuit of 'all-American' Asian

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

representation is seen as a necessary corrective to long-standing stereotypes of Asian foreignness, the respectability politics of *Crazy Rich Asians* are a reminder that it's the latter trope that may end up inadvertently entrenched.⁷⁶

In regard to Tseng-Putterman's point, there is no doubt that there is a sense of elitism and hierarchy when defining Asian ethnicities in relation to one another. Asians are not seen desirable in Hollywood media and when they are, they are usually East Asian—a lighter skin tone than South/Southeast Asians. This could be seen as colorism where someone with a lighter skin tone is seen as more attractive compared to someone else with a darker skin tone—even if they are of the same race or ethnicity.

25-year-old Korean/Caucasian male interviewee gives his thoughts on Hollywood imbalanced representation of Asians and critiques it, recognizing some Asian ethnicities are given more portrayals compared to others:

The issue seems to be that Hollywood doesn't actually give a damn about "representing all groups equally," but rather that they're more concerned with representing whoever gives them the most token points in their production. I find that most Asian Americans don't seem too concerned, at least until recently, with representation because most come from backgrounds where complaining is seen as weak, and where 'bootstrapping' is the accepted norm, or where the majority are still comparatively poor, and so receive absolutely no representation. Thai, Cambodian, Viet, and Filipino populations are examples of those that I have NEVER seen on screen, with the exception of Viets in Vietnam war films.⁷⁷

He makes a good point when criticizing Hollywood for not representing minorities, especially Asian Americans—and even when they do, leave out certain groups. If the dominant culture really cared about giving Asian Americans a voice and portraying them positively, they could and would have done it a long time ago. Why now? One could argue that people are just now recently voicing the lack of Asian American representation, but people have been advocating for

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Interview with 25-year-old second-generation Korean/Caucasian American male from San Jose, California, April 18, 2020.

more representation for decades. Netflix has been doing a good job releasing their own content with Asian American leads like *To All The Boys I Loved Before* (2018) and *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) yet not everyone has access to this online video-platform. In addition, only 8.2% of Asians had a speaking role in the top 10 films of 2018.⁷⁸

Progress seems to be slow in some areas and, in others, nonexistent.

Conclusion

To say that Hollywood media does not play a key role in perpetuating Asian stereotypes, especially the model minority, is simply ignorant. Throughout the history of film, Asians have been portrayed inaccurately and even nastily—in large part, due to the xenophobia and “yellow peril” that dates back to the 1800s when Chinese immigrants migrated to the United States during the Gold Rush in hopes of a better life. The fear of these people taking over the country was almost comical as the fact that only 0.002 percent of Chinese immigrants made up the U.S. population when the Chinese Exclusion Act was put in place in 1882.⁷⁹

“Racism, in the form of job exclusion and racially stereotyped roles, has defined the Hollywood film industry since its birth in the early 1900s,” says the sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen.⁸⁰ Old Hollywood movies were much more upfront about their racism towards Asians and this was seen as normal in Hollywood. Asian actors at the time were given roles that made them

⁷⁸ Stacy Smith et al., “Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2018,” September 2019, <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aai-inequality-report-2019-09-03.pdf>.

⁷⁹ History, ed., “Chinese Exclusion Act,” *History* (A&E Television Networks, LLC., November 19, 2018), <https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/chinese-exclusion-act-1882>.

⁸⁰ Kira Schacht, “What Hollywood Movies Do to Perpetuate Racial Stereotypes,” DW Made For Minds (Deutsche Welle, February 21, 2019), <https://www.dw.com/en/hollywood-movies-stereotypes-prejudice-data-analysis/a-47561660>.

appear as villains, giving the white male lead the opportunity to defeat them. This correlates with the idea of “yellow peril” as Asians were seen as evil beings who needed to be eradicated.

Mickey Rooney’s appalling character Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) is one of the early forms of “yellowfacing” in Hollywood, wearing fake buck teeth and squinting his eyes as he talks in an offense unidentified-Asian accent. Yellowface is when a white person portrays an Asian character, which is different than media whitewashing, which is when they change the original Asian role to fit a white actor.

Even today in 2020, Asian Americans are left with roles that simply do not portray who they really are. “Even today, most images of Asians and Asian Americans on screen weren’t created by Asians or Asian Americans, but by people who don’t know much about them,” says scholar Kent Ono of University of Utah.⁸¹ The way Hollywood media portrays Asian Americans, especially Asian American men, causes those outside of the Asian community to create their own perceptions of the racial group which results in misinformation that demonstrates prejudice and a lack of knowledge. Ono adds, “This creates a very strange idea of who Asians and Asian Americans are for those who don’t know any Asian people. And it also creates a very confused and estranged relationship by Asians and Asian Americans to Hollywood, because they can’t fully identify with this bizarre representation of themselves.”⁸²

Because of these inaccurate portrayals of Asian Americans in Hollywood film throughout history and the racist history America has towards Asians, Asian Americans have been subjugated to stereotypes that affect their daily lives. While the model minority seems to be a “positive” stereotype as it pushes the idea that Asians excel in academics and in their professional life, it simply is not accurate. One may argue that there are Asian Americans who

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

are successful, but perhaps they were pushed in order to do so because of societal pressure to fulfill this restrictive image.

Through interviews conducted for this research paper, we see evidence that the model minority and other racial stereotypes are harmful for Asian American men as it affects their masculinity and performance. The model minority stereotype forces the Asian American male to work hard in school and get a well-paying office job. They may be shown to excel in a professional setting, but their mental health may be drained due to the stressors they have to deal with. Stressors may include: pressure to have all A's, pressure to work hard in order to be a good employee, making their immigrant family proud, not being chosen to date by other females, being subjugated to racist/prejudice remarks from non-Asians, and so forth.

Crazy Rich Asians (2018) is one of the most recent films in Hollywood that portray Asian men in a more positive light. However, it is important to critique the film's favoritism towards East Asians despite the setting being in Singapore that has a populous South/Southeast Asian community. We can infer that despite the film's optimistic intention to show that Asian men are desirable, it is made clear that East Asians benefit more compared to South/Southeast Asian men. The film depicts South/Southeast Asian men as servants and guards. Perhaps media's subtle favoritism towards East Asian men is problematic as they are lighter skinned than South/Southeast Asian men. Journalist Tseng-Putterman even says the film was a white story with Asian heads.⁸³

⁸³ Mark Tseng-Putterman, "One Way That 'Crazy Rich Asians' Is a Step Backward," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, August 23, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/asian-americas-great-gatsby-moment/568213/>.

What is important to keep in mind is the diversity of the Asian American male experience. They vary in backgrounds as seen in the participants interviewed. They come from different ethnicities, different generations, different cities, and different upbringings. Despite being different from each other, they've all experienced racism and prejudice at some point in their lives. A few participants claimed stereotypes don't define their masculinity while a larger amount say they do. Ironically, those who were mixed-race/biracial did not seem to know or have direct experience with the concept of model minority. When given the explanation of what it was, none said they were subjugated to that stereotype. In contrast, all the full Asian American participants were victims of the model minority. Through these findings, I can infer the biracial Asians are able to be white-passing and do not have the same expectations in society that full Asian Americans are subjugated to. However, that does not mean they do not have stressors, just *different* stressors.

Asian American men are forced to conform to the concept of white hegemonic masculinity. Throughout their lives, their racial identity and their nationality subjects them to stereotypes, which creates inner dilemmas and conflicts. Unfortunately, due to deeply-rooted racism in western countries, it will be very challenging—and for now perhaps impossible—to break the barrier for Asian American men to be fully accepted. However, as long as the Asian American male can find support—in the form of family, friends, and groups who are willing to accept them for who they are—the stressors they experience may be diminished. And, in the future, more positive media representations can also help reshape these misperceptions of Asian Americans. For now, it mostly comes down to the effort the Asian American male makes towards seeing himself clearly, outside these stereotypical notions. This is the path to happiness. It may sound difficult, but it isn't impossible. There is hope.

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Appendix

Interview questions asked:

1. What is your name? Age? Where are you from? What is your ethnicity/racial background?
2. What kind of education have you had in your life? Did you go to college or any other form of higher education? Were you pressured by your family to do well in school? If you had the choice, would you not have gone to college (if you did)? If you did not go to college, how did your family react?
3. Did you grow up questioning your cultural identity as an Asian and American? Would you consider yourself more "Asian" or "American"? Are you proud of your ethnic culture? Do you know anything about your culture? If you are mixed race, how did growing up affect your identity?
4. How do you feel about Hollywood portrayals of Asian men? Are you offended or mad? Do you think Hollywood has a problem when it comes to Asian representation?
5. What stressors did you have in your life that affected your identity and masculinity? (please be very thorough)
6. When was there a time you were attacked by a white male in regards to your race/masculinity? Please explain.
7. Do you have a hard time trying to be masculine because of certain Asian stereotypes (i.e. small dick, small eyes, etc)? How do you feel about these stereotypes? Do they affect you in life?
8. What are your thoughts on the model minority myth?
9. What kind of personality do you have? How do you think you dress and who are the kind of people you surround yourself with?
10. Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What ethnicities did you grow up with in school? Do you think where you grew up affected the person you have become?
11. Are you first-generation Asian American, second-gen, or third? Or beyond? Do you think depending on your generation, it affected your cultural identity?
12. Did the way Hollywood media affect the way you think about your identity? Do you think Hollywood should give more representation to Asian Americans? Why or why not?
13. What is your definition of masculinity? Have you ever been made fun of because you're not 100% white? Do you think white men view your masculinity differently?
14. How do you think Hollywood should represent Asian Americans? Do you think Netflix movies/shows are better at representing Asian Americans?
15. Are you proud to be of Asian descent? Why or why not?